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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some of the issues faced by college faculty in the development of Web courses. Communication patterns are different in Web courses, and the implication is that they are likely to be less satisfactory than in the traditional classroom. The experience of the authors' college of education has shown that increasing opportunities for communication in the traditional campus setting has not always moved smoothly; it is evident that cooperative learning approaches do not always please students. In the distance education setting, in which students may not participate unless they are truly engaged, in contrast to the traditional lecture, in which attention may wander, the opportunities for real communication may be great. Faculty members need to know more about teaching and learning from many perspectives, and then they need to consider whether Web courses really enhance or limit communications. (Contains 14 references.) (SLD)

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Communications and Web Courses: Can We Talk?

With good intentions, we have new guidelines and parameters to support the development of this emerging teaching medium - teaching on the web (CALEC, 1996; CHE, 1997; WCET, 1997). We have surveys and research, benchmarks and guiding principles. They look reliable, valid, vital to our pursuit of excellence. Of course, we find the dictum about communication in every document. It is not just mentioned, but highlighted. We are concerned about communications. It is a fundamental part of any human endeavor and essential to the world of work. Is it also vital to web courses?

One of the differences between distance education and the gathering of students to people a classroom seems obvious. Communication patterns are different - and the implication is that they are not only different, but likely to prove less satisfactory. In a classroom there is a sense of community that derives from a close collection of human beings. Surely a group of people, all signed up for and simultaneously taking a course together is an opportunity for rich discourse and the building of community. This is an assumption, only and highly suspect from my own experiences. I think it makes as much sense to say that the people who come together to attend a state fair, or the people motoring together during morning rush-hour are a community rather than a crowd.

The questions are genuine. Are we building community in current classes, or assuming that community is being built? Are collections of students, coming together in university settings, having more positive opportunities to communicate than those at personal computers, taking courses?

Background experiences

When Goodlad's movement (1990) hit our college of education, we rushed headlong into cohort groups. We pulled students into community groups, partnerships, mentoring, even set up grant projects to provide distance education. We were delighted with the opportunity to build partnerships, to extend collegiality to students, teachers, and build stronger community with peers.

We had a powerful backlash. Many students did not get along with one another and factions formed. Some of the factions were aimed at fellow students, and in some classes the students formed ranks against instructors. Teachers in public schools who were partners in teacher preparation programs frequently complained of having to take time to meet and talk with students. Many were resistant when approached about spending time discussing the work or sharing insights about student growth. Only a small group of university fellows could be pressed into teaching in the schools and participating in the programs. There are still some professors actively involved, but others have found ways to go back to university lecturing.

Backbiting and dissention was so common in our first cohorts that a group of professors began to look for an explanation. Why would increasing opportunities to communicate develop into a war zone? The explanation was really quite simple. It could have been predicted if we had looked in the literature on group development. In fact, beginning

with Lewin's (1946) and Festinger's (1950) work with groups and Lacoursiere's (1980) work with nursing cohorts, there was research that showed a distinctive developmental pattern. Succinctly, when formed in college, groups tended to go through a fifteen week pattern that included introductory activities, loosening personal boundaries, reactionary conflict and dissatisfaction, and then, finally about the last month of the time together, cohesion and enhanced community. When student views were elicited and student groups formed, there was a time when dissent reached a peak and the group either worked through it or changed into factions.

Based on this research, those in leadership (teachers) are going to get the brunt of the dissatisfaction, and if not handled well or resolved in a timely fashion, a "we-they" mentality may emerge, pitting students and teacher against each other. This may continue for the life of the group -- the entire span of the course.

No surprises here, claims Luft (1984) or Johnson & Johnson (1994), who distilled the research on group development into four stages - forming, norming, storming and performing. But we were surprised --shocked, even. Our little experiment was reaching critical mass. Why didn't we expect it? Flander's (1970) landmark work with communication patterns in the classroom, and subsequent research on the nonverbal communication patterns in classrooms presents a potential answer. We were surprised by the hostility and change in power because we were not aware of how infrequently teachers were engaging in honest dialogue with students in educational endeavors prior to our efforts to collaborate.

Appraising Discourse

The power in educational discourse is carefully loaded. Teachers lecture, exposit, declare, instruct, demonstrate, profess. In large lecture settings few questions are possible and the situation may allow one or two remarks, but the instructor neither has the time nor the burden to respond to criticism. Even in smaller settings, the instuctor usually arrives, armed with a power point presentation, overheads and a lecture, carefully laid out and developed. There is a time for questions, but only one or two students may get the opportunity to pose them. Each time, the professor can launch into explanations, further diatribe or cincture of the carefully tied Gordian knot of personal belief.

Socratic dialogue, a spin-off of the Fred Friendly format, rippled through the university, briefly. In this setting, all participants, including the professor, are given the role of equality through interspersed and carefully managed elements of time and opportunities to respond. Each participant, teacher and students, prepares and then all sit down with a moderator carefully assuring that many voices are heard and that the professor cannot engage in that time honored practice of reframing student comments to fit personal beliefs and advance a personal agenda or perspective.

Professors occasionally set up situations where a point was posed and each student in the class is expected to advance or counter the material. The pattern of communicating looks rather like this: Teacher (T) Student (s1, s2, s3) - T, s1, T, s1, T, s2, T, s1, T, s3, T.

The idea of open Socratic communication suggests that the development includes many more participants - or T, s1, s2, s3, s4, s5, T, s6, s1, s7, s8, s9, T.

At the same time that these events were occurring in the college setting, we were working to advance a more democratic process in my own teaching. My daughter and I (co-presenters and authors of this paper) had many hours of dialogue about the voices in the classroom. We both recognized the absence of dissenting voices being welcomed. And not only the behaviors of the teacher kept that format going, but also the way students behaved tended to lock the teacher into the role of truth "sayer" and holder of the conversational advantage.

Who has not been hostage to one angry student, voicing a course long barrage of opinions, denying others a voice, raging at the teacher, and as the time progresses, student dissatisfaction, teacher feeling out of control, students disavowing the experience and turning off the subject while tuning out the speakers. How many times have teachers turned the class into group work, only to find that group after group has a dominator, someone taking over the teaching role while others sit back and take a passive role?

Learn by doing

Reinsmith (1992) provided answers to some of those teacher - student communication patterns. He posits four archetypes of teaching, including models similar to Socratic dialogue, Bruner's (1986) discovery learning, and cooperative group work. What might we learn about communication if we studied different styles of learning and teaching coming together? We set up group work, developed a manual on working in group and at about that time the writing of the Johnson brothers (1994), and Slavin (1991) emerged to focus attention on cooperative teaching and learning. Finally, communication and group work comes of age, right?

Everyone can provide an explanation for why cooperative learning did not revolutionize education. Some teachers evoked more change than others, and recognizing the changes in the role of teacher -- moving from position of *sage and conveyor of* wisdom and knowledge to teacher as *guide* did impact the teaching scene more than Socratic dialogue. It did not replace the time honored institution of lecturing, large group instruction, or gain student approval. Some students loved it, but many students still groaned at the mention of a group component in a course.

So now we come to the web course

Many researchers have gone into classrooms and observed, of course. We have the rich findings of Jersild, Bruner, Hunter, Kounin, and all those involved in the effective schools movement. Our point is, who looked, what were they looking for and what were they expecting to find? What philosophy was being posited to color what was seen? And then, what was viewed as the right thing to be happening.

It is fundamental. When speaking of communication patterns and the teacher, who is speaking? What do they think should be happening, and when they go to observe, what do they find in classrooms? Is the communication pattern in the lecture hall less rich than

the communications on the web? Do students share more world view or less when working in web courses? Is there less sharing and discourse about material in the course or more? Would A.S. Neill think the communication patterns were less satisfactory in web classes? Would Bruner? Missing that answer, I posit a best guess... not in the least.

Constructing meaning and building community works better in the web world than in any other learning situation. Communications are rich, address the subject of the course and give a clear indication of the level of understanding. It is easy to see the growth in the students, know how to encourage deeper connections and enhance understanding.

It is true that the tools for class discussion are not well developed, that they are cumbersome and the largest point for dissatisfaction. But the unhappiness seems to be directed at the poverty of the tools and not the ability to communicate. To the contrary -- students talk of the discussions they have with spouses, peers, in other settings, at chat rooms and with roommates. It does not appear that there is less communication or lessened opportunity to communicate. Instead, it appears that there is less teacher control of the patterns and more student empowerment and engagement in ownership of ideas.

Who says that the group in the classroom is the most cogent or most valuable communications? Who do students talk with and what about? The discussions that are emerging through web work appear to be much farther reaching and provide insights from other parties outside the course, itself. What a rich and fertile change from the vapid chit chat commonly generated in the ten minutes allotted for discussing and sharing the lesson in the classroom. Ongoing and student generated engagement in the ideas and notions at a personal life level occur routinely in web work.

Setting up a web class may make it possible to get things we have never had before - dreamed of having but could not grasp. How can we utilize this new medium to strengthen communications? Is that the real issue, or is the question, how can we help teachers rethink that communicating and discussion really is about? We have opportunities to do things that are pedagogically sound that will not work in the lecture hall. Students give the appearance of thinking and attending during lecture, but that is seldom a fully engaging experience. Most wander in and out of the material, and frequently do not make the connections the lecturer is so carefully illustrating. Does that happen as much in the web course where the student is in the "driver's seat" rather than the passengers or passive position?

What do we know about the differences? Which is the more democratic, more active, more constructivist learning situation? Do groups do what we think they do, or are we believing in the efficacy without really knowing what students feel about the situation and experiences in group? Is the communication less effective or just different? If we want more effective communications, do we hope to replicate what we do in lecture? Why? What evidence do we have to show that it is anything more than time honored? Finally, with what we know about the individual differences in the way people learn, the different styles of teaching and learning, why not look for who is gaining from the new medium. Yes, we know that it is often an older student, many times already involved in a

career or family life. . . and is that a possible common denominator? What of the myriad of students who are not completing a diploma or degree? Is there a way to make the web an alluring and exciting counter to the class room design that they eschew?

Those are the questions we could be asking. Let us broaden what it means to educate, what the roles of teacher and student might be and visualize the ways that web courses can reach out to and communicate with different folks in different and stimulating ways. Something powerful and wonderful is happening in the web courses we are developing. We need to know more about teaching and learning from many different viewpoints. Then let us look to web courses to see why they are so appealing to some students. That is the point at which we can decide if web courses permit or limit communications, if they enhance thinking and reasoning or lack the creative flair and dynamics of meeting together in a common room to share a common lecture.

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